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Promoting Reading Amidst Repeated Failure: Meeting the Challenges

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This article reports a project undertaken in a Caribbean high school among 17 students in a low stream Year 3 class of reluctant readers (mostly boys) who had been experiencing repeated failure. The project, aimed at promoting leisure reading among the adolescents, ran for 16 weeks. During this period, reading materials – mostly those in which the students expressed an interest – were placed in the class, and 45 minutes were allotted once per week for activities that promote leisure reading. While there were no dramatic changes in the adolescents' reading habits, the project provided insights into factors that have an impact on students' leisure reading behaviour. Practical guidelines that can help in meeting these challenges faced by such students are offered.

Creating Interest in Reading

Creating interest in reading among students is no doubt one of the greatest desires of educators, because they rightfully recognize its importance in a literate society (Guthrie, Alao & Rinehart, 1997). It is through reading that much of the world is opened to students (Stanovich, 1993). With an increasing body of research (Nagy & Anderson, 1984; Anderson, Wilson & Fielding, 1988; Krashen, 1993), it has become more and more apparent to educators that not only does reading educate their students about the world, but it also is one of the best ways to ensure students' growth. The more students read, it is found that the more gains they accrue in their academic endeavours. Importantly, these gains also manifest themselves in their overall language development in that the more they read the more they improve in vocabulary knowledge, comprehension, spelling, writing style, oral/aural language, and control of grammar (Krashen, 1993).

It is generally felt that having created an interest in reading among students in the primary grades, the challenge is to get them to maintain it when they enter high school, and even more so as they move through those grades. Bintz (1993) writes that 'much research on secondary reading suggests that most primary students

nourish themselves on a regular diet of quality reading experiences, yet by the time they reach high school, they lose much of their appetite for reading, to a point where many appear anorexic' (p.606).

This problem of adolescents doing very little reading is one that in recent years has become a discussion point among Caribbean educators. Educators, parents, education officials, examination bodies and other interests groups all acknowledge the importance of reading. In fact, such importance is placed on reading that much of the adolescents' academic failure is blamed on their perceived limited reading. For example, in 2000, the regional secondary school leaving examination body, the Caribbean Examinations Council (CXC) wrote:

General evidence suggests that candidates are becoming less and less familiar with fine literature and even any kind of light fiction. It appears as if the examination paper is the longest piece of writing that some candidates would have read at any one time. (p.10)

Stimulated by comments such as that of the CXC report, I embarked on a program aimed at cultivating interest in reading among reluctant Caribbean adolescent readers. I targeted a group, who were not only reluctant readers, but had experienced repeated failure and were disenchanted about reading and all school-related activities. I was particularly interested in these adolescents because my past experience as a classroom teacher in the Caribbean suggested that students of this nature tend to be a neglected group.

However, I have learned that trying to influence the reading habits of such students may be complicated by factors that are exacerbated by the learning environment of the school. In this article, I examine some of these factors that emerge when a leisure reading programme was introduced to a class of non-readers in a secondary school in the Caribbean. I present some challenging antecedent conditions that apparently shaped the students' perception of themselves as readers, and offer some suggestions of what schools and teachers can do alleviate the effects of such negative factors.

The Project

The program was introduced to a Year 3 class of repeating students in a high school where, as is the case in most Caribbean countries, grade retention and streaming are practiced. Most of these students had experienced constant failure in the school and had thus repeated other classes besides their current one. This class was selected because their English teacher, Mrs. Anthony, volunteered for the program. She pointed out that the class was mainly comprised of students who had very little interest in reading or anything related to school and that anything designed to promote reading among them was worthwhile. The class, which belonged to the low stream, had 17 students (13 boys and 4 girls) with an average age of 17 years 7 months. The ages ranged from 15 years 2 months to 20 years 1month.

The students' reading interests were ascertained by an initial survey (Warrican, 2004) and through class discussions. Using these as a guide, I placed informational materials and a variety of magazines (e.g. sporting, music, popular culture), in the class. I also included some books (graphic novels and biographies of popular personalities) that the students did not mention as interesting to try to entice them to widen their reading range. The program, which lasted for 16 weeks, was run once per week for 45 minutes during one of the English periods. During the 45 minutes, the class engaged in activities that are recommended (Ingham, 1981; Krashen, 1993; Matthews, 1987; Trelease, 1989) to promote reading for pleasure. The students read silently, read aloud to each other in small groups, and discussed reading materials among themselves and with the teacher. Additionally, the teacher directly encouraged them to read and even read aloud to them. Importantly, they were allowed to choose their own materials to read.

Each week the students also completed a reading record form where they recorded the materials that they read during the week, as well as an estimate of how much time they spent reading for the week. Data from the reading record forms, observations and interviews with the students and teacher will be presented in the

next section. However, before doing so, it is necessary to make a few observations about the implementation of the programme.

Reluctant Readers and their Challenges

Overall, the programme appeared to have had very little effect on this group of adolescents. For the month prior to the implementation of the program, baseline data gathered through the reading record form revealed that the students reported reading on the average 25 minutes weekly. Over the 16 weeks of the programme, there appeared to be no significant increase in their reading amounts as they reported reading for just about 26 minutes weekly.

From the start and continuing throughout the program, the students reported that they were not interested in reading. For example, one student, Orlando, had this to say:

I hardly read. I don't like to read that much. I just don't find it interesting ... Really and truly, I only read in class ... I have a lot of other things that I prefer to do...

As the program progressed, it became quite apparent to me that this self-professed lack of interest in reading by the students was linked to their views of themselves as readers. For example, when I asked James how he felt about reading, he answered:

I hardly read because it is hard. I have never been able to read well. I do not like it at all. I only do it if I have to.

Several of their teachers told me that the students felt that way about themselves because they indeed had major reading difficulties. This suggests that while indeed their academic performance may be directly related to their reading behaviour, as suggested by many in the Caribbean, greater attention ought to be paid to identifying the reasons why these adolescents are not reading. It seems likely that the blame for their academic failure should not be cast solely on limited reading, but also on a school system that brought them this far without equipping them with the adequate reading skills.

For example, my own observations indicated that whenever they were asked to read orally in class, these students either found an excuse to avoid doing so, or when they complied, it was slow and jerky. I, in fact, conducted a more formal assessment of the reading levels of five randomly selected students (4 boys and 1 girl) using Leslie and Cadwell's (1995) Qualitative Reading Inventory – II (QRI-II). The passage they were asked to read for the QRI-II assessment was approximately at the difficulty level of materials written for their grade level. In all cases, the passage was found to be at their frustration level, indicating that materials that are written for their grade level may be too difficult.

From my classroom observation, the QRI-II assessment, and interviews with students and teachers, I had no doubt that the students' reading ability affected their reading amounts, and even the materials they chose to read. For example, none of the students attempted to read a book during the program. At the start of the project, the students warned me that I should not expect them to read books. They were too difficult they claimed. They instead requested mostly magazines.

While pictures made the magazines physically more attractive than many books, most of the responses indicated that the pictures also made the magazines easier to read for them. For example, Courtney, a male student, said:

Reading is boring. I cannot read too well but magazines are okay because they have pictures. When I read from magazines, the pictures help me to understand. The pictures are not too bad.

This comment suggests that Courtney, and no doubt others in this group, understood that images in reading materials can be used as text tools to enhance their comprehension.

One of the hurdles the class teacher, Mrs. Anthony and I faced was finding a way to widen their reading to include books. We however found it difficult to find books that were pitched at the students' reading levels while at the same time providing content aimed at their age group. The problem was that many books available to us, even when written at a level that

these adolescents could read, were actually a turnoff for them because they were written with younger age groups in mind.

In an effort to find other materials that matched both their reading levels and their interests, Mrs. Anthony and I decided to introduce them to books about the personalities and activities that they were reading about in magazines. We thought that, in spite of their warning, we might entice them to include books in their reading materials if they were about the people and activities that they liked and if they were not too difficult. Thus, since these students were showing a big interest in sports magazines, especially basketball, we decided to offer them books about personalities such as Shaquille O'Neal, Michael Jordan, and Jason Kidd. We thought that these books were well suited for the purpose since they were popular both among elementary and high school students. Significantly, while the students read the magazines that featured their favourite characters, when given such books, they showed no interest in reading them.

We also tried to introduce them to graphic novels in an attempt to widen their reading. None of the students had seen a graphic novel before so I had to explain what they were. The students were particularly interested when I told them that many of the graphic novels were based on some of their favourite television serials. They also liked the idea that they had pictures and limited words. The students, having not seen graphic novels before, eagerly looked forward to their arrival. However, when they arrived, the students examined them, and labelled them as big comic books and promptly rejected them. Comic books, they said, were for children.

Recognizing the students' reluctance to read books and their reading difficulties, Mrs. Anthony and I included read aloud sessions in the programme where students were given the opportunity to listen to and discuss stories that they were not prepared or able to read for themselves. When I asked students what they thought about the read aloud sessions, they all admitted that they were very enjoyable. Judy for example said:

Teacher read them story real good. I enjoy them a lot. I wish she can do this more. I like all the stories she read.

I further asked her if she would try to read some of the stories herself. She said:

Those stories are hard to read. I can't read them. They are too hard. Those in the magazines are easier. They don't have so much hard words. It would be better if she [Mrs. Anthony] read them to us. That is a lot of fun.

These responses suggest that although the students enjoyed the stories, their perception of themselves as readers was so negative that they were not prepared to attempt independent reading outside of magazines.

Linking the Challenges to School Policy

Despite the challenges with the implementation of the programme that were mentioned earlier, it was apparent that school factors had a greater influence on the students' reading behaviour. One school-related factor that seemed to have affected the students reading behaviour was the library. It was unfortunate that, in our search for suitable reading materials, we could not rely on the school library for assistance. I examined the reading materials in the school library and found nothing of interest for struggling reluctant readers. In fact, most of the books that were on the library's shelves were classics or novels that gained high reviews in literary magazines. The school's library did not even carry magazines. It was clear that this facility was not catering for students with reading difficulties or those who were unmotivated readers. The students themselves said they did not use the library because it had nothing that they were willing to read. For example, when discussing this point, Janessa said:

They do not even have magazines in there [the school library]. I do not like reading books and all they have in there are some boring books.

Janessa's comment helps to explain why the school's library is unpopular and not heavily used. When asked, many students in the school, both readers and reluctant readers, reported that they enjoyed reading magazines. It seems then,

that restricting their selections solely to what they perceive as literary materials, the librarians are in fact limiting membership to students who are willing and able to read those types of materials.

Another school-related factor that seemed to have affected the students' attitude to reading was the school's policy of streaming. Many of the students were reluctant to participate not only in the program activities but also in all school activities. For example, in discussion with Ken about this issue, he said:

I am fed up with school because of some of the teachers. I feel as if I am not going anywhere. Sometimes I feel as if I would never get anywhere in life. What's the sense working hard? I am in the low stream.

Ken's comment, a sentiment shared by several of the other students, showed a belief that the stream in which he found himself decided his fate. To make matters worst, the common perception by these students was that they were not treated with the same respect as those in the upper stream classes. For example, Ken also shared this with me:

Some of the teachers treat us very badly. For example, there is this Geography teacher. He is not a good teacher. He tells the students that they are dumb and he tells me that I am not the brightest person in the world. He sometimes says that it seems as if we got hit on the head with a coconut and that's why we are so dumb ... I do not think he tells the students in the upper stream classes the same things because they are doing the work how he wants it. When I hear these things I feel like staying home.

These students, thinking that even the teachers were making life difficult for them, seemed to view their future as bleak no matter what they did. They apparently believed that it was not worth the effort to participate in anything organized by the school. Thus, we did not find it an easy task to convince these disaffected students to read in the time allotted for reading or do any of the other activities.

It must also be noted that these were students who were all repeating Year 3 and most of them had actually repeated several other classes. Their repeated failure coupled with the school's policy of retention may have also contributed to the students' negative attitude to reading and other school activities. As Worthy (1996) points out, 'students who have continually met with failure see reading as the enemy' (p. 205) and no doubt school too.

An Unsettling Issue

Though the major focus of this paper was not to address gender issues, it is impossible to end it without making reference to what can be described as a very unsettling issue. It is noteworthy that of the 17 students in this class of struggling readers, 13 of them were boys. This seems to reflect a situation about which many educators in the region have been expressing concern: boys are not reading! Indeed this perception also exist further a field that boys, more so than girls, are likely not to be readers, either because they cannot read or because they have no interest in the materials available to them (Moffitt & Wartella, 1992; Hall & Coles, 1999). For the most part, the boys in this study fit into the former category, in that they either could not read, or struggled with it. It of course did not help that the school ignored a key component of any programme aimed at promoting reading – catering to interests (Whitehead, Capey, Maddren & Wellings, 1977; Ingham, 1981; Gilles, 1989; Clary, 1991; Hall & Coles, 1999). This was evidenced by the fact that the library was stocked with mostly novels (materials that either did not appeal to them or that they could not read), but there were no magazines (materials in which these students expressed an interest).

Ironically, these boys (and the four girls) claimed that they were in fact not interested in reading. This might have been a defence mechanism to cover up their weakness in reading, because when the teacher read to them, they mostly reported that they enjoyed the experience. This raises the question as to whether their disaffection with reading came about as a result of lack of interest or some other factor, such as poorly developed reading skills.

What might have been extremely distressing for these boys and other students in this situation is the fact that the school had no programme in place to address their undeveloped reading skills. Since, as research (Krashen, 1993; Mullis, Campbell & Farstrup, 1993) suggests, this inability to read can adversely affect overall academic achievement, school life for these students might not have been a rewarding experience. Indeed, they appeared to be trapped in a cycle that had them repeating classes and spiralling further downwards in the stream. This no doubt affected their perceptions of themselves both as readers and indeed as students in the school. One might ask how these boys could have reached this far without anyone properly addressing their reading difficulties. While it is arguable that a problem of this nature might be rooted in the primary education system, the more pressing concern is what is being done at the secondary level to support these students. This question has particular relevance for the boys since they seem to be the ones mostly affected by the school's absence of an adequate support system. It is evident that neither grade retention nor streaming, the approaches used by the school to deal with the situation, seems to be the answer.

The fact is that while advocates of grade retention may have good intentions, there is evidence to suggest that often, the benefits accrued during the repeat year are later lost when the students move on to higher grades (NASP, n.d.; McCoy & Reynolds, 1999). Research (Meisals & Liaw, 1993) suggests that if grade retention is practiced, then there must be an effective support system in place in order for positive results to be had. It seems pointless, to have students repeating a class, as the practice of the school in this study, without putting a programme in place to help them. This creates additional problems as the students experience repeated failure. What is perhaps even more troubling is that it appears boys are more likely than girls to be retained (McCoy & Reynolds, 1999), as was the case with the low-stream class that participated in this research. Seventy-six percent of this class of retained students were boys.

Research (Slavin, 1987, 1990; Lou et al, 1996; Harlen & Malcolm, 1999) suggests that the practice of streaming students according to perceived ability is also dubious. Good and Brophy (1994) point out that though many educators view this practice as a sensible response to academic diversity among students, it has no basis in the research literature. They add that, when students are streamed, some teachers develop negative attitudes to and expectations of the students in the lower streams. For example, they may perceive the students as being incapable of creditable academic performances. This contention of Good and Brophy seems to be supported by the findings of this study. Some of the teachers of the low-stream class expected very little from the students, and they revealed their expectations by hurling insults at them, as illustrated earlier in Ken's interview.

What is evident here is that the majority of the students in this low-stream class were boys. Indeed, throughout the school, there was a noticeable increase in the ratio of boys to girls from the high to low streams. This is illustrated in Figures I – VI, which present the class numbers for Year Groups 1 to 3 over a two-year period. These figures show that though there is no clear pattern in the ratio of boys to girls in the middle streams, generally, in the high streams there are more girls than boys whereas in the lower streams, this pattern is reversed. This pattern seems to indicate that boys are more likely to be negatively affected by the practices of streaming and retention. These negative effects were evident among the boys in this class, who had to face the concomitant challenges of being retained, as well as being assigned to the lower stream at the school, with nothing in place to address their difficulties (for example, those related to reading). It is no wonder that these 13 boys and their 4 female counterparts felt alienated and out of place in the school, and that follow up investigation found that only two of them remained there long enough to graduate.

Fig I: The Number of Boys and Girls in the Streamed Classes (Year 1, 2000 - 2001)

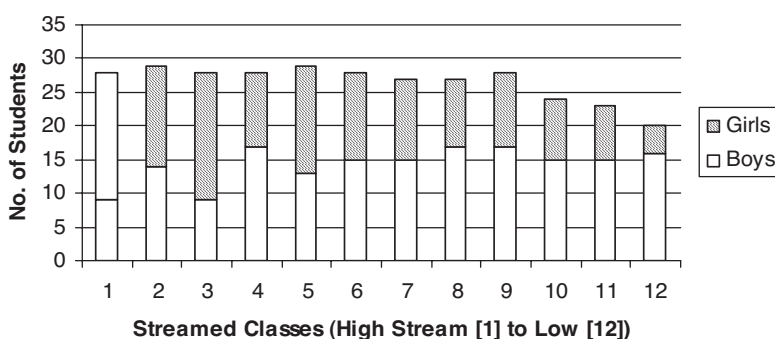


Fig II: The Number of Boys and Girls in the Streamed Classes (Year 2, 2000 - 2001)

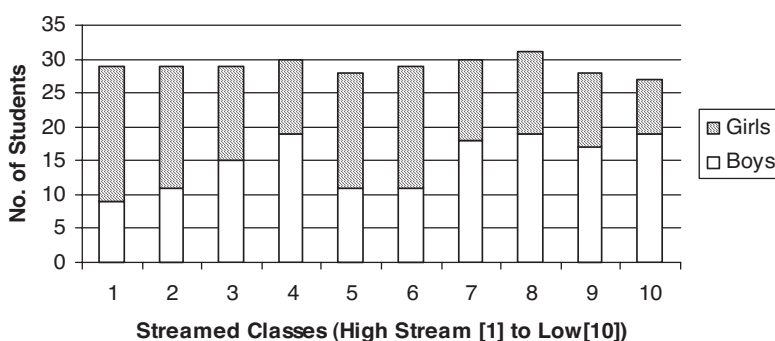
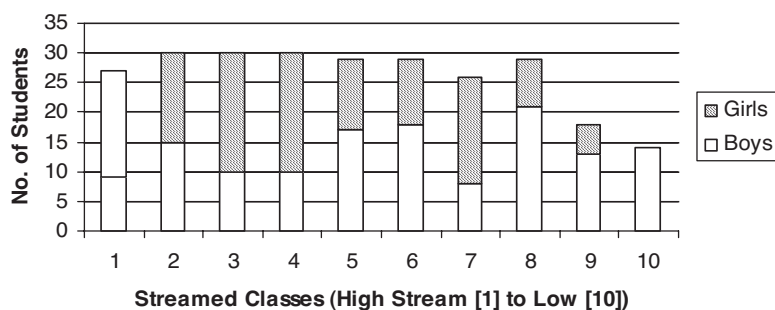
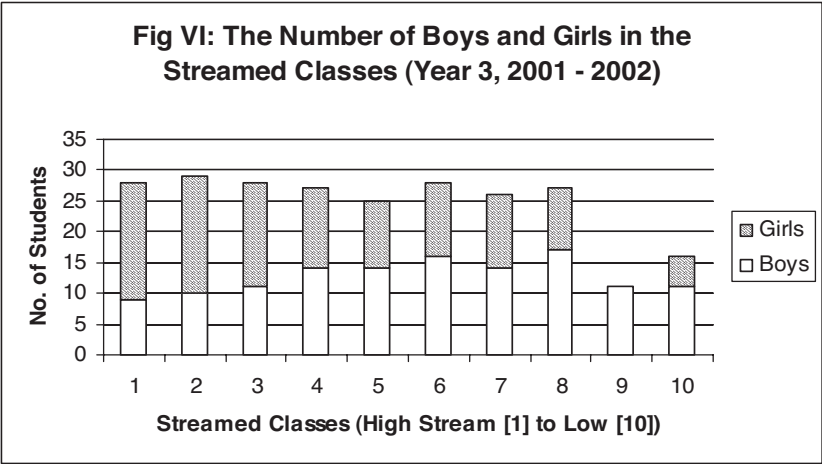
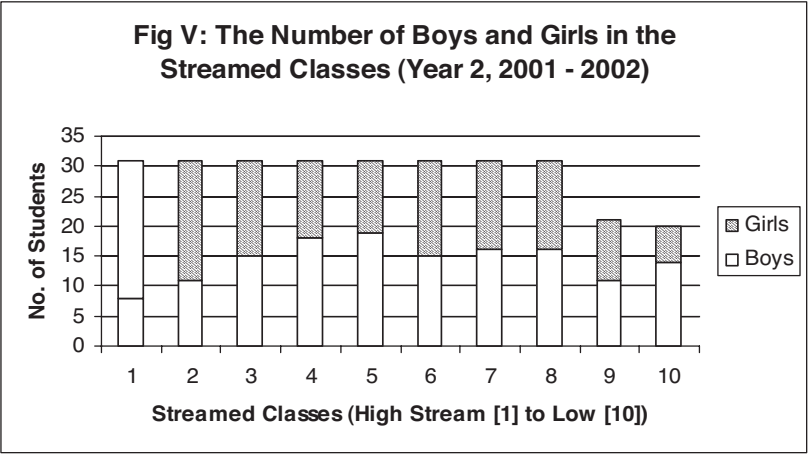
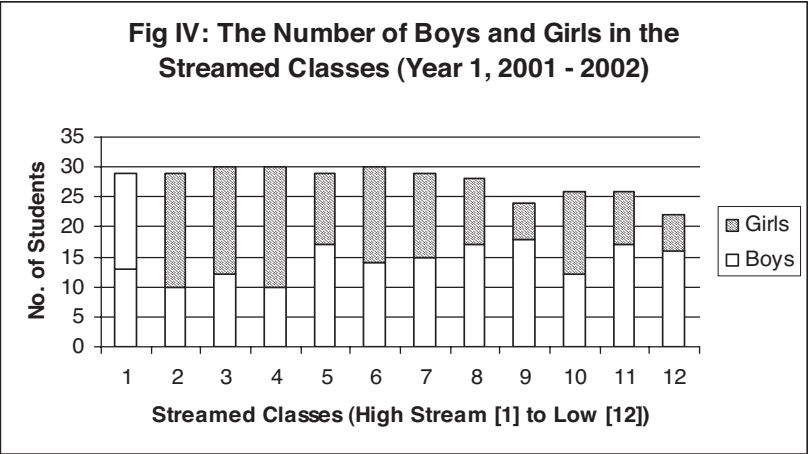


Fig III: The Number of Boys and Girls in the Streamed Classes (Year 3, 2000 - 2001)





There is no doubt that all these factors have an impact on the students' reading, as well as their overall academic performance. Thus, if we truly believe that reading plays an integral part in the students' academic achievement, then effective ways must be found to help failing students and to raise reading standards, especially among boys.

Meeting the Challenges

Although the reading program put in place for this class of reluctant readers did not result in a significant change in the reading behaviour of the adolescents, it provides sufficient lessons to guide other endeavours in similar settings. It highlights some pitfalls that a school may wish to avoid if it is going to produce students who can not only read, but also have a passion for it. It shows that when students have fallen into the rut of failure, it is difficult for them to escape from it and then all aspects of their school life may be affected. They may become so discouraged that everything, including reading becomes a burdensome chore. Bearing this in mind, it seems unjust that the blame for the students' limited reading is placed squarely on their shoulders. Often, it is the repeated failure experienced by adolescents that results in their disinterest in reading rather than a disinterest in reading contributing to the failure.

If creating interest in reading is a goal of educators, then it becomes incumbent on the school to ensure that their students are fed a steady diet of a variety of literature. Even where the students are so turned off that they themselves refuse to read, teachers could read aloud to them to provide them with the opportunity to experience the joys of reading, even though only vicariously. Importantly, the school must attack failure early, because once failure becomes a habit, reading and all other school activities become the victims. But what is even worse, the students themselves may suffer, both in terms of having a low sense of self worth, and being alienated from an activity that can be a wonderful source of knowledge and pleasure.

It seems then that if any reading program is to enjoy widespread success in a school, the various issues highlighted earlier would need to be

addressed. The following guidelines are suggested to maximize the chances of success for a project such as the one reported here:

- Ensure that the library caters for students of different characteristics. For example, there should be books that are geared to students with different reading abilities and interests. A concerted effort should be made to ensure that materials that are of interest to boys are stocked in the library since they are the group that appears to be in need of most encouragement.
- To complement the library, as was done in this project, teachers should set up classroom collections. As with the library, these collections should aim to cater to the diverse needs and interests of the students, particularly the boys.
- In making materials available, although bearing in mind the students' reading level, teachers and librarians must be careful not to provide materials that will belittle them. A balance must be struck between reading level and content that is suitable for the particular age group.
- Students must of course be allowed to select materials that interest them to read. Although teachers may want to introduce other materials to their students to widen their reading, the students must be given choice in what they read. Remember that it is not easy reading something that is not of interest to you.
- Time must be provided *daily* for students to engage in leisure reading activities. This need was made more evident when the programme was implemented within the structure of the school's organisation, which permitted 45 minutes to be designated for leisure reading in the classroom each week (done on a single day). However, this appeared to be not as beneficial for these students as was expected. Perhaps it would have been more beneficial to help the students to develop a pattern of reading by allotting 15 or 20 minutes per *day* for leisure reading.

- A school with a policy of streaming and grade retention should review these practices. In the school where this project was implemented it was clear that these factors negatively affected the students' attitudes specifically to reading and to school in general. I came away from the school with the feeling that a system of mixed-ability grouping and one in which students can move up with their age peers, might give the students a better chance of success in reading and all school-related activities.
- Importantly, to support students such as those who participated in this project, the school should have a system in place to assist them with their reading skills and other academic areas. If these students are not helped, they will experience repeated failure and will eventually resist reading and other school-related activities. Thus, the students might benefit from other scaffolding activities such as read aloud sessions, the use of books with accompanying tapes which would allow them to hear the material read and follow in the text and the exposure to other age-appropriate developmental reading activities.

It is acknowledged in the Caribbean, and indeed worldwide, that the ability to read is a necessity in a world where much information abounds in written form. But the ability to read provides more than access to information. It also provides a means of gaining pleasure and relaxation. This goal is not less worthy than the former one mentioned, especially as our lives become more stressful daily. If we accept that one of the goals of education is to help people to live a better quality of life, then educators, whether in the Caribbean or elsewhere should be constantly seeking ways of meeting the needs of all students, whatever their abilities. It is therefore incumbent on them to find ways of ensuring that all students experience success in their endeavours. No doubt we all agree that this includes fostering their ability to read for pleasure.

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